DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 604 CS 213 682

AUTHOR	Puccio, P. M.
TITLE	The Computer-Networked Writing Lab: One Instructor's View. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-CS-93-03
PUB DATE	93
CONTRACT	RI88062001
NOTE	4p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Indiana University, 2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Basic Writing; *Classroom Environment; *Computer Networks; Higher Education; Teacher Behavior; *Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Writing Laboratories
IDENTIFIERS	*Basic Writers; ERIC Digests; University of Massachusetts Amherst

ABSTRACT

According to an instructor of basic writing in the Writing Lab at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, he can teach differently in a computer-networked writing lab than he did in a conventional classroom. Because the room is designed to teach writing and nothing else, it offers a congenial workspace where the teacher can interact with students. Aspects of the computer classroom encourage student independence and define the teacher's role more clearly as an accomplice in their efforts. Students experience a communal ownership of the classroom because the network allows them ready access to all of the texts, theirs and the teacher's, that comprise the course. The computer classroom environment allows the teacher to respond to individual student needs with more flexibility, empathy, and respect. The networked classroom can provide students with a congenial setting where they might learn not only to endure writing but even, on occasion, enjoy it. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED353604

The Computer-Networked Writing Lab: One Instructor's View

by P. M. Puccio

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS 213 682

ERIC Digest

Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills EDO-CS-93-03

Indiana University
2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150
D80
Bloomington, IN 47408-2698
(812) 855-5847

The Computer-Networked Writing Lab: One Instructor's View

by P. M. Puccio

The setting in which we meet with our students is a factor in the composition of student-teacher relationships. Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, reflects on how congenial academic surroundings with conspicuous amenities affect the intellectual work of students, as well as their sense of community. Expressing her dissatisfaction with the underprivileged women's college, with its spare lodgings and uninspiring food, Woolf explains how the richly endowed male college provides a setting in which one's mind can become disencumbered enough to enjoy agreeable company and lively conversation: "how good life seemed, how sweet its rewards, how trivial this grudge or that grievance, how admirable friendship and the society of one's kind, as, lighting a good cigarette, one sunk among the cushions in the window-seat" (San Diego: Harcourt, 1957, 11).

Woolf maintains that a student's education is, to a great extent, shaped by the external character of that education, that the quality of self-knowledge, human interaction, and behavior in general is fashioned by the qualities of the rooms in which we live and learn. Or, to invoke Woolf's language, that "urbanity . . . geniality . . . [and] dignity . . . are the offspring of luxury and privacy and space" (24).

Most public institutions of higher learning, and a good many private ones as well, are not currently distinguished for their excesses of luxury. With administrators struggling to secure little more than an adequate supply of paper, let alone the teachers to use that paper, we can hardly expect to stumble over a surplus of amenities. The University of Massachusetts, where I teach, is certainly no exception to this sad standard. And yet, the computer classroom, the harvest of an earlier, more bountiful budget, furnishes students with an oasis in this fiscal desert.

Carpeted, air-conditioned, decorated, somewhat, with reasonably pleasant museum posters, the computer classroom is decidedly sumptuous in comparison to other rooms on this increasingly threadbare campus. Very significantly, there is no teacher's desk. When I work in the class, I write at a computer identical to those my students use; I print from the same laser printers they do; I sit on the same cushioned, adjustable chairs they do.

P. M. Puccio is an instructor in the Writing Laboratory at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

"A Room of One's Own"

I discovered almost immediately after I began teaching in this room that I could teach differently here than I did in the conventional classroom. I welcomed the chance to teach writing in a setting where I could be more interactive. No longer was I moving 20 uncomfortable desks into a circle, in a vain attempt to transform a barren all-purpose room into a site appropriate for a writing workshop. Finally in the computer classroom, I was teaching writing in a room designed for writers—a room where nothing else was taught and where nothing else could be taught (Gay, 1991).

Students quickly recognize that the computer classroom can be a congenial work space—and they behave accordingly. Although my section of Basic Writing meets at 8 a.m., four or five of my students typically arrive at 7:30—sometimes to work but most often to talk. After all, this classroom is probably more comfortable than some of their dormitory rooms. The rest of the class arrive closer to 8:00, and, inevitably a few stroll in a little later; at whatever time students arrive, they receive a "Class News" message from me, outlining an agenda for the class and inviting them to begin. These messages make students responsible for their work; even those who miss class entirely can find out exactly what was expected of them for the day.

Other aspects of the computer classroom—and my teaching practices in it—likewise encourage student independence and define my role more clearly as an accomplice in their efforts. Frequently, my students and I work together at the same task—some in-class writing, an on-line interchange conversation, or some preliminary writing for an essay. They know that when I'm writing, my eyes are fixed on my screen and not on them: I'm not looking over their shoulders at what they are writing or how much they are writing. Especially for basic writers, who, for one reason or another, generally feel insecure about their writing, my respect for their privacy can be liberating.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Because I don't prepare my responses for the work we do together, there is a refreshing spontaneity to the class which helps me to view it a little more from the students' perspective. During a recent interchange discussion about their autobiographical essays, several of my students chided me for not writing one myself. "We want to know more about you," one student announced—a remark which the rest echoed in chorus. And so, a week later I presented them with my own personal essay, for which they graciously thanked me, saying that it comforted them to know that at least one of their teachers had been, at some distant time in his life, a child.

Because students move through the writing process at different rates, I can't expect all of them to be ready for a given stage of that process on the same day. Quite often, one group will be ready for peer response, while some are still sketching out an early draft (Sirc and Reynolds, 1991). I mingle—contributing questions or ideas to the discussion, offering suggestions to the student who is having a hard time drafting an essay, explaining an assignment to someone who is confused, encouraging peer respondents to respond in more detail.

However bustling the computer classroom might become at times like this, the atmosphere is almost always notably relaxed: students take short breaks when they need them; small social circles form among students who work near one another; the atmosphere is almost jovial. Virginia Woolf might have paraphrased herself and remarked that the basic writer had found a classroom of her own.

Computer-Network Affects Classroom Practice

Students experience a communal ownership of the classroom because the network allows them ready access to all of the texts, theirs and mine, that comprise the course itself. There are designated directories for in-process student writing, for final drafts, for peer response sheets, for my assignments, for explanations of computer functions, and for course policies, syllabi, and work schedules. The work schedules map out deadlines, shared class activities, as well as recommended dates for progress through the writing process. Needless to say, all of this management is not only abetted by the computer network, it is shaped by it. Within a couple of weeks, students comfortably navigate their way through the network to locate or verify whatever they need (Posey, 1993).

Using the computer network to provide a readily available structure for students is like opening my desk for them to see and use; it suggests that the class is something that we share, and, although I might conduct it, I do not orchestrate it. Formerly, if anyone wanted to look at a draft which I had taken away to read, the student would have to wait for me to finish with it; in the computer classroom, that draft is as available to the student as it is to me. I've also found that I teach differently: I can plan complicated in-class writing assignments with impunity—revealing the entire class plan to the students so that they know exactly where the assignment is heading. No longer do I play the conjurer, performing appearing and disappearing acts with their writing.

These changes in my classroom practices, all effected by the computer network, allow me to respond to individual student needs with more flexibility, empathy, and respect. Students need teachers who don't expect all of them to write the same, to think the same, and to turn out the same—teachers who can neutralize a history of bad writing experiences and help dignify a new succession of positive writing experiences.

It is, of course, true that teachers with less interactive pedagogies can use the computer network to reinforce their own teaching practices. Indeed, some other teacher, with a teaching style antithetical, perhaps even antagonistic, to my own, could write a paper with the same title as this one and describe student-teacher relationships dramatically different from those I describe here.

Despite our pedagogical differences, we all have a responsibility to recognize that the networked classroom can provide students with a congenial setting where they might learn not only to endure writing but even, on occasion, to enjoy it. We should also remember that the relationships which we compose in those classrooms can, and often do, reverberate outside the walls of the rooms in which we teach. Perhaps we would do well to reflect on the words of the nineteenth-century educator F. W. Sanderson, who said "Schools should be miniature copies of the world we should love to have."

References

Gay, Pamela (1991). "Questions and Answers in Basic Writing and Computing (Computers and Controversy)." *Computers and Composition*, 8 (3), 63-81. [EJ 431 123]

Posey, Evelyn J. (1993). "Word Processing in the Basic Writing Classroom." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 20 (1), 23-30.

Sirc, Jeffrey, and Tom Reynolds (1990). "The Face of Collaboration in the Networked Writing Classroom." *Computers and Composition* (spec. issue), 7, 53-70. [EJ 411 535]

Sources For Additional Information

Batschelet, Margaret, and Linda Woodson (1991). "The Effects of an Electronic Classroom on the Attitudes of Basic Writers." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English. [ED 344 206]

Pomper, Marlene M., and Sandra Brown (1989). "Writes of Passage." Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the Ontario (Canada) Speech Communicators Association. [ED 324 701]

Reigstad, Tom (1991). "Teaching Basic Writers: The Personality Factor." Research & Teaching in Developmental Education, 8 (1), 57-64. [EJ 446 288]

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI88062001. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.